

Chapter 33

Helping Clients Understand Their Role in This Dance

Absent clear guidance about how to “do” EMDR therapy, clients will generally try to resolve the memory in the reprocessing phases using the same strategies that they do outside of EMDR therapy when their bodies feel similar ways. They will try to solve the trauma using ways that are intuitive, familiar, and ineffective. We engage in EMDR therapy because it is different from the approaches that clients have spent their lives practicing. EMDR sessions are not a power think-think session. If we approach healing in EMDR therapy too abruptly or with too much agenda, healing will run from us. When healing comes, it comes to us slowly and as a byproduct of deep present-based noticing. There is nothing to figure out. The right thoughts come to us as a function of healing. We don’t create them with intention or use our neocortex to purposefully assemble the right thoughts in just the right order.

Before educating clients with complex trauma about how to do their role in EMDR therapy well, I’d like to begin with several strong suggestions for therapists that are different from standard orientation guidance. It is common for therapists to instruct new EMDR therapy clients to “let things go where they go” and have “one foot in the past, one foot in the present.” This is rarely the best guidance for clients with complex trauma when they are at the very beginning of their EMDR journey. As we are able to verify that clients are able to do the core tasks that we are asking them to do, we can start to experiment with removing any of the initial restrictions that we put in place. Starting reprocessing with fully unrestricted processing that promotes anything and everything coming into awareness is a recipe for overactivation with most clients with complex trauma.

Don't "Let Things Go Where They Go"

With relatively healthy clients with wide windows of tolerance, it is important that we not construct obstacles that interfere with the client's noticing. In short, we want to let the client's awareness go wherever it needs to go in the service of healing. Staying out of the way allows plenty of space for insight to appear. It allows the client to form essential connections between different categories and aspects of wounding.

Clients with complex trauma typically have very narrow windows of tolerance, enormous volumes of closely related and highly volatile traumatic content, and extremely limited adaptive information for the difficult information to be metabolized into. As highlighted elsewhere in this book, we need distressing content to come, but it needs to come at a digestible rate and intensity. Allowing too much distress to come into awareness too soon is an invitation for overactivation. My primary goal is to help the client start somewhere and take steps to increase the chances that the client has a productive experience trying to digest the memory we started with. Anticipate that with many clients with complex trauma "letting things go where they go" will want to go everywhere. If you allow things to go everywhere in reprocessing with many clients with complex trauma, you will get nowhere.

Don't "Have One Foot in the Past, One Foot in the Present"

Consistent with other sections of this book, we need memory content to come, but we need it to come at digestible rates and intensities. Clients with complex trauma are highly likely to overly-dissociate into the memory. This is a problem in EMDR therapy because all noticing that is productive must happen in the present moment and in the client's right-now nervous system. I am not encouraging clients with complex trauma to "have one foot in the past and one foot in the present." That is an invitation for the client to be half dissociated in the past. I want my clients with complex trauma to glance at the bad memory and "take a bite" of it. I want all the client's focus to be directed to noticing and digesting the last piece of activation. Metaphorically, leaving a barn door wide open leaves the client exposed to trampling horses, cows, pigs, or anything else that wants to rush out.

Yes, this is a slight restriction on reprocessing. Taking more digestible bites of the memory with clients with complex trauma is often the only effective way to work. Do not use restrictions like this with healthier or

more resourced clients. Remove these restrictions when they are no longer needed for safe and effective reprocessing.

The Brownie Mix of EMDR Therapy

Similar to the Tricycle metaphor, the Brownie Mix metaphor assumes that doing EMDR therapy as the client involves several very simple ingredients. If clients are not clear about what the elements of EMDR are, what noticing means and how to do it, how to interact with the memory, and how to avoid strong agendas, it is easy to mix into EMDR therapy ingredients (like corn or green beans) that may mess up the brownie mix. It is helpful to clarify the client's role and the therapist's role in this therapy, or the client may attempt to do both.

I describe EMDR therapy reprocessing as consisting of three core ingredients: activate a specific memory (but do not overactivate), notice deeply what comes up as a result of that activation, and do these things while your nervous system is experiencing a bilateral stimulation. This is the core of the brownie mix. During the vast majority of the session, I expect that the client will be engaged in deep present-based noticing and digesting the distress that they were too overwhelmed, too shut down, or didn't have the accessible adaptive information needed to metabolize at the time that the memory happened. If the client is doing anything else, they may be stirring creamed corn into the brownie mix of EMDR therapy. These stray ingredients may include trying to figure out the trauma, actively pulling in too much memory content, trying to evaluate their performance as the client, noticing unproductive channels, or noticing the distress in the memory but not doing so in the present moment/present body.

Be Concrete About What Noticing Means

It is entirely possible that many of your clients will not know what “notice that” means. Noticing is an active verb in EMDR therapy, and it is not a culturally intuitive activity in many of the cultures that wound people with complex trauma. Noticing is different from simple awareness. I often use the following language to orient clients to what noticing means, particularly when noticing body sensations.

If you have sensations in your body during EMDR therapy, it can be helpful to scan your body and find the place of most distress and just notice its qualities deeply. Does it have a color, shape, or texture? Can

you trace its boundary with your awareness? Is it heavy or light? Does it have the same density throughout? Is it moving or still? Does it have an impulse or want to do something? Notice it as if it were an object in the world. Notice its qualities deeply, starting with its shape. Notice it like you are about to sketch it or draw it.

Many clients may be aware that they are experiencing an emotion, for instance, but are not noticing how that experience is appearing in the body. EMDR therapy is a somatic psychotherapy. The reprocessing phases start and end with the body for a reason. Nearly all of the transformational EMDR sessions I have observed involved the client spending much of the first half of the session observing somatic distress. Teaching clients what noticing means is a Phase Two skill. You don't want to first discover that clients have no idea what noticing means the moment you move into Phase Four for the first time.

Walking Clients Through the Protocol

One of the most helpful ways to orient clients to EMDR therapy is to walk them through the Phase Three through Seven script. This allows you to give clear psychoeducation at each stage with common examples. It also allows clients to clearly understand what is expected of them in all of the processing phases. It creates the possibility for clients and client parts to give full and informed consent to this process.

When You Start, You Will Get More Information. Use It.

Starting somewhere tolerable with clients with complex trauma will generate needed information. If processing goes smoothly and the client is able to manage all aspects of reprocessing, that is very helpful information about this client's nervous system and their accessible fund of adaptive information for this type of memory. If clients struggle in EMDR therapy, that struggle is also communicating essential information needed so that adjustments can be made. EMDR therapy may be difficult, but it must be tolerable. It must not cause the client to decompensate. As with every other effective psychotherapy with clients with complex trauma, we strive to work at the intersection of what is productive and what is tolerable. There is nowhere else to work, nowhere else to start. Starting somewhere will help clarify where those borders are.